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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 001271

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SUBJECT: SARKOZY-BIYA SUMMIT: A FRENCH VIEW FROM CAMEROON

REF: YAOUNDE 1159

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

11. (C) Summary. Less than one week after returning from UNGA and a protracted stay in Geneva, President Paul Biya left October 22 for Paris, where he will attend UNESCO's general conference and meet on October 26 with French President Sarkozy for the first bilateral meeting between the two presidents. Cameroon's private press has headlined speculation that Biya will seek Sarkozy's permission to extend his term in office beyond the currently constitutionally mandated 2011. French Charge d'Affaires Philippe Truquet expects Sarkozy will highlight the need for Biya to jump-start the local economy and to play a more active regional peacekeeping role. Truquet personally questioned whether France's large aid program in Cameroon (its largest in the world) was in line with French strategic interests, suggesting that there may be a realignment, especially if Biya does not improve his economy in the next three years. End summary.

France's Message for Biya

12. (C) Truquet told Pol/Chief on October 23 that President Sarkozy's meeting with Biya is a first "get to know you" session; Truquet stressed it was not a state visit and that Biya's main purpose in Paris was to attend the UNESCO meeting. Sarkozy will likely stress the need for Cameroon to spur investment and economic growth, he thought, especially since HIPC completion and the recent parliamentary elections (with the presidential election not due until 2011) present a window of opportunity to boost economic development.

13. (C) According to Truquet, Sarkozy's second message will be that Cameroon needs to increase its role in regional peace building and African peacekeeping. The peaceful conclusion of the Bakassi dispute with Nigeria should also present a window of opportunity for Cameroon's security forces to play a more active international role, Truquet said. When asked whether Sarkozy would raise the need for more political openness and democracy, Truquet responded that democracy in Africa was a long process and that Cameroon was making slow steps in the right direction. Especially since the next election is four years away, Truquet did not expect Sarkozy to focus on Cameroon's internal politics in this week's meeting. However, he opined that the new French President is unpredictable and has been known to take a tough stance with other heads of state.

¶4. (C) Truquet thought Biya's main message to Sarkozy will be "don't abandon us," encouraging France to retain its level of civilian and military support. Truquet said that when he saw Biya off at the airport the Cameroonian President proclaimed he would "return with good news." Truquet had no idea what that "good news" might be.

A Possible Rethink

¶5. (C) Truquet noted that Cameroon is France's largest aid recipient. This is "by accident, not strategic design", since 100 million euros of France's total 150 million euro aid program here comes from HIPC debt relief funds. Most of France's aid supports infrastructure and, to a lesser extent, education programs. He noted that the Sarkozy administration is reviewing its foreign policy priorities, including its footprint in Cameroon. Truquet said that personally he thought his government's large assistance and staffing in Cameroon (including an Embassy, three Consulates and five cultural centers) was out of proportion with its relatively minor interests here. If Cameroon does not improve its economic performance before the next national election, Truquet thought it would be difficult for France to maintain this large aid relationship and presence. He ventured that, in any case, if Biya cannot deliver a tangible improvement in people's lives in the next three years, he will be "finished" internally.

Comment

YAOUNDE 00001271 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) Truquet, who has been in Cameroon for two years, highlighted serious concerns about pervasive corruption and growing frustration with the cost of living and poor social services. He agreed that France and the United States have many similar goals in Cameroon. We may be able to build jointly on the Sarkozy meeting to press Biya to move more quickly on economic reform and to be a more active global player. Local media expects Biya's visit will also generate some attention in France on the handling of the investigation into the January murder of a French national NGO worker, the subject of a recent French TV investigative report that was critical of both governments. (Biya reportedly plans to meet the woman's family in France to extend condolences, which may deflect criticism.) We anticipate Biya and Sarkozy may also chart next steps in the establishment of EIFORCES, a Cameroonian-based, French-supported training center for African peacekeeping forces (reftel).
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